

Getting you started...

Responding to consultations

Responding to government and other public consultations is often a key element of policy and campaigning roles. But with over 600 consultations being issued by the government every year, how can you ensure your voice is being heard?

Why do it

Responding to consultations gives you an opportunity to communicate your knowledge and expertise to decision-makers, and influence the development of government policy so that it better reflects the needs and aspirations of the individuals, groups and organisations you represent.

When and how to...

Prioritise: First of all, consider whether or not this particular consultation is one you should be responding to. 'Consultation fatigue' is something that many policy and campaigns staff are only too familiar with, so it is important to weigh up the benefits of sharing your research and expertise against the downsides – using up limited time and resources. The key question you should be asking is: does the consultation issue fall within into your organisation's policy priorities? If it doesn't, don't be scared to decline a response.

Collaborate: If the consultation does concern an issue that is a priority for your organisation but you don't feel you have the resources to make an in-depth response, check whether any partner organisations or umbrella bodies are responding. You can either feed in your comments to them or submit a joint response. In all cases it is worth talking to other organisations about a consultation: it is always helpful to discuss the nuances of a policy issue with others. (It is also a good way to check you've understood the consultation questions properly.)



Demonstrate your authority or expertise on the issue: Always introduce yourself, stating clearly who you represent, why you are interested in the consultation and what your main areas of expertise are. Don't forget to include contact details so that any comments can be followed up where necessary. If it's important that your views remain confidential, be sure to say so, as the consulting department may wish to publish responses as part of the results of the consultation.

Support your case with evidence and examples: Remember that all views expressed in consultation responses should be supported by relevant evidence or practical examples. Consulting your users, members or beneficiaries adds legitimacy to your response and provides convincing support for your argument. Include a brief overview of how your organisation consulted its users and be sure to send in copies of any supporting documents.

Be constructive: There's a fine line to tread between airing your concerns frankly and directly, and avoiding being overly critical or disparaging. Even if they are well supported by evidence and/or experience, comments should always be constructive and courteous.

Be clear and concise: Ensure that your response is clear and concise. If the consultation is divided into separate questions, focus on each one individually rather than writing a long, general response. You might want to include the questions above your responses or use numbers to make it clear which question you are answering. Sub-headings and bullet-points can also make key points stand out.

Don't worry if you only have something to say about a few of the questions or a particular section of the consultation; a short, specific response will have greater impact than one that answers all of the questions but includes unnecessary or irrelevant information. If your response is longer than 2-3 sides of A4, consider writing an executive summary to highlight your main issues, or using an appendix for more detailed comments.

Get in early! Finally, send your response as early as possible, giving the department or consulting organisation more time to consider your views and review any new evidence you may be providing. All consultations should be announced in advance to maximise opportunities for responding, and should remain open for a minimum of 12 weeks, so you should have plenty of time to input your thoughts. However, if for some reason you only found out about the consultation at the last minute, it might be worth getting in contact with the organisers to see whether a late response would be accepted.

Where to go next

- Find out more about involving your beneficiaries in consultation: www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/campaigningeffectiveness/projects/index.asp?id=10370
- Read through the Government Code of Practice on Consultation: www.berr.gov.uk/whatwedo/bre/consultation-guidance/page44420.html
- Sign up to NCVO Policy Forum bulletin, with details of current public consultations relevant to community and voluntary organisations, by emailing ncvopolicyforum@ncvo-vol.org.uk

